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ABSTRACT

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Distance Learning Policy Laboratory has established an ambitious action agenda that calls on college and university and state leaders to work toward results in four areas. These are (1) extend citizen and student access to infrastructure, programs, services, and training; (2) take advantage of regional resources that can be shared; (3) use state and institutional financing policies to support distance learning more effectively; and (4) provide more and better information for quality improvement and accountability. Some examples of action in each of these areas are described. (SLD)

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SREB

Technology Can Extend Access to Postsecondary Education

An Action Agenda for the South

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December 2002

Technology Can Extend Access to Postsecondary Education

An Action Agenda for the South

Greater access to postsecondary education never has been more important.

SREB's *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* asserts that "in the long run, nothing influences a state's prosperity more than the education of its people. ... The South was poor most of the 20th century because it lacked enough educated citizens, not because it lacked natural resources. In the 21st century, the citizens of SREB states should have the same level of collegiate education found elsewhere in America. In fact, we should do better."

Affordable access for both traditional-age college students and adults who seek retraining has become an economic necessity. Building new campuses is unlikely to meet the demand. "We cannot reach our education goals without more fully utilizing technology," SREB President Mark Musick concluded at the national meeting that featured the presentation of results of an extensive study of policy challenges in distance learning.

Distance learning — for those in remote locations as well as those who live a few blocks from campus — offers many advantages. It can save time and expense. It can help people to balance the demands of school with those of home and work. It can create convenient "anytime, anyplace" learning opportunities. Finally, it can prepare students to use the technology that they will need in their careers. No human endeavor is exempt from the global impact of information storage, information dissemination and knowledge creation. Every student needs to be technologically literate in preparation for the work force of the future.

While the South has made great progress in using technology, many barriers remain. Overcoming these barriers will take significant action from colleges and universities and from state and regional leaders. For three years SREB's Distance Learning Policy Laboratory (DLPL) — working with groups of faculty, college and university administrators, and system and state-level staff — has been studying ways to remove these barriers.

The group concluded that increasing the South's education technology capacity can help address critical needs in the SREB states. The study committee's recommendations cover seven policy areas and center on three themes: extending access, improving quality, and lowering costs to taxpayers and students. This document concludes with a list of the seven reports and how to access them.

In the last decade, state leaders generously have supported technology requests from higher education. However, in times of fiscal austerity, technology efforts will have to meet higher standards of "value added" to be considered part of central or core budgets. Institutions will need to demonstrate long-term, systemic commitment to technology funding from base budgets. State and system leaders will need to prioritize technology funding for important statewide goals, such as expanded access and economic development.

An action agenda for the states, colleges and universities, and the region

The SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory has established an ambitious action agenda. While not all actions may be realized in the next couple of years, an achievable long-term plan should be initiated now. This action agenda calls upon college and university and state leaders — in cooperation with SREB — to work together toward results in four priority areas:

- **Extend citizen and student access to infrastructure, programs, services and training.**
- **Take advantage of regional resources that can be shared.**
- **Use state and institutional financing policies to more effectively support distance learning.**
- **Provide more and better information for quality improvement and accountability.**

Extend citizen and student access to infrastructure, programs, services, and training

Students and working adults need access to affordable high-speed connections to the Internet. Faculty need training in how to use technology. Students need help in independent study. Communities and states need cost-effective programs that educate students in fields with critical shortages of personnel, such as nursing and teaching. To meet all these needs, many parties must participate in a concerted, coordinated effort.

- Expand access to high-speed Internet service for homes, libraries and community organizations, especially in rural areas of the South. While much progress has been made, many rural areas of the South do not have adequate technology infrastructure. The public and private sectors will have to work together to extend broadband access to all homes, government offices and schools. Colleges and universities should provide local users with technical assistance and training so that existing networks are utilized fully.

- Recognize and support the need for increased training and assistance for faculty and the need for a higher level of service to students through innovative state technology plans. Colleges and universities have moved rapidly to expand online courses and programs, but faculty training and support in developing materials as well as essential student services have lagged. Successful programs provide not only high-quality curricula but also easy access to registration and bill-paying services, library materials, counseling and tutors.

Faculty and Course Development

The University of Houston, Clear Lake, has developed a complete production cycle for online courses. The program devotes one semester to design, one to development and one to testing. A team of professionals — a course project manager, instructional designer, Web developer, graphic artist, instructional programmer, multimedia specialist and editor — work with faculty through the testing and certification processes. See www.cl.uh.edu/webfac.

- Revise financial aid and tuition-reimbursement policies to increase available aid for part-time distance-learning students and for working adults. Most of these students are ineligible for traditional aid and struggle with the application and distribution processes of most existing programs. State and federal leaders can take the lead in improving distance learners' access to financial aid.

Financial Aid Programs for Distance Learners and Working Adults

Delaware's Workforce Development Grant program, supported by the state's Blue Collar Training Act, is directed to nontraditional students registered for fewer than 12 credits and employed by small businesses (100 or fewer employees). In a cooperative effort with the economic development office and a technical college, the state also is extending aid to students who are exclusively distance learners. See www.doe.state.de.us/acm/newacm/workforce.asp.

Vermont's unique Non-Degree Grant program supports students with demonstrated financial need who enroll in courses that do not count toward degrees but that will improve employability or encourage further study. Unlike most financial-aid programs, which require formal admission and enrollment, this program provides a "kick-start" for students to enroll quickly and easily in electronic courses.
See www.vsac.org/paying/pw_pay2.htm.

Literacy and Workforce Development

Kentucky's Tuition Discounts and Employer Tax Credits program provides discounts to full-time employees who complete high school equivalency diplomas and gives tax credits to businesses that assist their employees. GED recipients who qualify can receive discounts of $250 per semester, and employers are encouraged to provide employees with paid release time to complete GEDs. See www.kycwd.org/dael.

The **University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences'** College of Nursing offers online courses for registered nurses in rural areas who need bachelor's degrees or continuing education credits for recertification. See www.nursing.uams.edu.

- Focus new distance-learning programs on fields with critical shortages of personnel, such as teaching and health care, workforce preparation and literacy programs. States and colleges and universities should work together with employers and community organizations in developing programs that respond to these needs and in providing easy access to these programs.

- Expand access to virtual libraries and online databases. Ideally, state and regional library networks and facilities of all types should be linked and should provide easy access for all. Such a link not only will improve access to information for everyone but also will save state and local tax dollars. State and local leaders can work with colleges and universities to take the lead in establishing this priority. SREB can develop regionwide cooperative arrangements to help realize this goal.
- Support and conduct a regionwide campaign to emphasize the need for lifelong learning and to promote distance learning as a cost-effective, convenient way to access high-quality learning. SREB and its member states should undertake this initiative to inform prospective students of all ages about the important benefits of a college education and about how distance learning can help them.

Take advantage of regional resources that can be shared

Sharing resources among member states is at the core of SREB's mission. The SREB *Electronic Campus,* which began in 1998, was a giant step toward achieving this goal for distance learners. Today, more than 8,000 courses and 250 degree programs are available from more than 300 colleges and universities in all 16 SREB states. It is time to extend further the advantages of regional sharing.

- Adopt an electronic tuition rate policy that allows colleges and universities to set prices for distance learning that are the same for all students, regardless of where they live. Electronic tuition rates should be based on real market factors rather than on the idea of in-state/out-of-state tuition, which is outdated for electronically delivered courses and programs. States and colleges

Electronic Tuition Rates

SREB's Academic Common Market/*Electronic Campus* "marries" the old and the new by serving the growing number of working adults who cannot physically relocate to pursue their studies. The program helps students in SREB states to pursue high-quality, certified degree programs that are not available in their home states, offers these programs through distance learning and charges in-state tuition rates. Though only 2 years old, the program is providing expanded opportunities for working adults to learn without leaving home and for SREB states to share resources. See www.electroniccampus.org.

Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia and **West Virginia** have established policies that give colleges and universities flexibility in charging tuition for distance-learning activities for nonresident students. In essence, these states have established electronic tuition rates. For a list of courses available at electronic tuition rates, visit the *Electronic Campus* at www.electroniccampus.org.

and universities need to support policies for electronic tuition rates, which will expand students' choices and opportunities, better utilize scarce resources by filling vacant spaces, and likely increase institutional revenue at little additional cost. SREB's Academic Common Market/*Electronic Campus* program demonstrates the potential of electronic tuition rates

- Develop agreements that make it easier for students to transfer their courses from institution to institution. SREB can assist states, two- and four-year colleges and universities, and technical colleges in developing regional policies for articulation and credit transfer that support students. Such regional agreements are essential to accommodate the increasing number of students who attend multiple institutions, particularly through distance learning. There needs to be a system to ensure that students' time and money spent on learning are protected and appropriately recognized.

Ensuring Credit Transfer

The Tennessee Board of Regents Online Degree Program allows students to choose a college or university from which to earn their degrees and to complete entire degree programs online from courses offered by 13 two-year colleges and six universities. All credits earned are fully transferable among all participating institutions, and all of these institutions are regionally accredited. See www.tn.regentsdegrees.org.

- Designate certain colleges and universities to serve as "degree-completer" institutions, where students' credentials from various education providers will be certified. Such a step can motivate students to complete degrees and can reduce "time to degree."

- Amend state policies for licensing and program approval to reduce the number of reviews by different agencies that public and private institutions must undergo. While some states are moving in this direction, others should work (with SREB's assistance) toward reciprocity and common standards of state approval region-wide. This practice builds on the *Electronic Campus*' "free trade zone" — in which states recognize one another's approval of courses and programs.

Collaborative Efforts

The **North Carolina** Consortium for Distance Education in Communication Sciences and Disorders provides opportunities for practicing public school speech-language professionals to upgrade their credentials, via distance learning, without interrupting service to their schools. The consortium of five institutions (Appalachian State University, North Carolina Central University, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC-Greensboro and Western Carolina University) share and cross-list courses and share faculty, through joint appointments, in this highly successful cohort-based distance learning program

The University Learning Center of Northern **Oklahoma** exemplifies an alternative to creating new institutions or branch campuses. The Oklahoma regents opened the center for residents of northern Oklahoma in the Conoco office complex in Ponca City to make higher education — supplemented by technology through its OneNet — available in that region. See www.poncacitynews.com/ulcno.

Texas' Multi-Institutional Teaching Centers are a collaboration of six two- and four-year institutions in Houston that share a suburban campus. There are five other such collaborations in the state. The centers avoid building expensive traditional campuses, bring the universities to adult students to reduce their commutes, and provide other services to complement distance-learning efforts. See www.collegefortexans.com.

The Associated Colleges of the South has established a "virtual classics" program formed by 15 private liberal-arts colleges. This program gives ACS students access to the best instruction and scholarly resources while remaining in the supportive environment of the individual colleges of liberal arts. See www.sunoikisis.org/SUNOIKInitiative.html.

- Develop and improve joint academic programs delivered by distance learning. States, systems, colleges and universities, and the private sector should work together in this effort, which can expand access and quality while encouraging institutions to pool scarce resources.

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Use state and institutional financing policies to support distance learning more effectively

Technology-based instruction affects all aspects of the institution — including how buildings and classrooms are equipped, how faculties teach and students learn, and how services are provided. Many areas of financing policies need to be changed; creative policies can expand access to distance learning.

- Create start-up loans for new distance-learning programs. States need to provide more upfront investments for distance education than for traditional programs. Conversely, colleges and universities must create greater return on these investments through collaboration, cooperation and innovative business practices.
- Change finance policy and budgeting approaches to include technology infrastructure and some equipment purchases in capital budgets, rather than in operating budgets or special appropriations. States should take this step to address technology's fundamental impact in the modern institution. At the same time, colleges and universities should do a better job of incorporating the costs of desktop equipment, software and personnel training into their operating budgets.
- Provide centralized funding for support services that capitalize on technology's ability to serve multiple institutions, use economies of scale and save taxpayer dollars. Technology can increase services and lower

Statewide Consortia

Florida's Community College Distance Learning Consortium prepares statewide contracts of academic and support products. These contracts are negotiated so that all types and sizes of colleges share in volume pricing. Several student services are funded and supported centrally. The Community College Library Automation (CCLA) licenses digital resources for the entire state so that all college students have access to the same content. See www.distancelearn.org.

Mississippi's State Board for Community and Junior Colleges has three major initiatives that work together to provide distance-learning opportunities statewide: the Mississippi Virtual Community College; the Community College Network; and Online Workforce Training. In addition, access to MELO, the system's online library, and to the Virtual GED Online provide a breadth and depth of services in "one stop." See www.msvcc.org.

The **South Carolina** Partnership for Distance Education is a consortium of public and independent colleges and universities, pre K-12 school districts, public libraries, government agencies, businesses, industries and health care organizations across the state. Designed to increase access to education through the use of technology, the Partnership will share resources in a "Pre K—Lifetime" approach to learning. See http://www.sc-partnership.org.

costs in several areas, including administrative data systems, libraries, virtual college catalogs and marketing. States and systems should continue to explore technology that serves more than one institution, and SREB should work to find strategies to achieve regional gains. SREB's Ways In™ initiative, designed to create a regional network of distance-learning services for students, would share information that no institution, system or even state could provide on its own.

- Participate in and take advantage of joint purchasing cooperatives such as the American TelEd Communications Alliance, which SREB helped found. States and colleges and universities, through these purchasing cooperatives, can often achieve important savings and greater service.
- Focus resources on areas that are likely to produce significant cost savings — either for students or for the institution. For example, colleges and universities have redesigned some large undergraduate courses to incorporate more self-directed learning through technology. Some institutions are reducing the need for face-to-face instruction by making portions of classes accessible through the Internet. Such actions benefit students and achieve greater returns on institutions' investments.

National Cooperation

The American TelEd Communications Alliance is a purchasing cooperative for schools and colleges and universities. SREB and other regional organizations were founding members. The primary emphasis is to establish contracts for basic and advanced telecommunications products and services. By leveraging volume, expertise and market organization, the ATAlliance seeks to give schools and colleges more access to better-quality products and services at more affordable prices. See www.ATAlliance.org.

Achieving Cost Savings

The **Pew Learning and Technology Program** supports projects to redesign courses and save instructional costs through the use of technology. Projects in SREB states include those at Virginia Tech (math), the University of Alabama (algebra), the University of Tennessee (Spanish), Florida Gulf Coast University (visual and performing arts), Tallahassee Community College (English compo-sition), and the University of Southern Mississippi (world literature).
See www.center.rpi.edu.

- Focus special technology investments on projects that accomplish important statewide goals, such as improved technological access in job fields with critical personnel shortages or joint activities that save money. States can effectively use these strategic investments as a way to "seed" program development in colleges and universities that may be neglected because students or employers cannot cover the costs.

State Investment Projects

The **Louisiana** Board of Regents' Distance Education Initiative Grant Program has supported several distance-learning efforts by colleges and universities. The program targets key statewide concerns (such as faculty development, new online programs and the need to reach rural students) and requires a collaboration of at least two colleges or universities. See http://epscor.phys.lsu.edu/lasrec/main_degrants.html

The **Maryland** Higher Education Commission's Faculty Online Technology Training Grant program has focused on cooperative and consortial arrangements to help faculty who need support for teaching online and sharing resources, teaching materials and best practices.
See www.mdfaconline.org.

Provide more and better information for quality improvement and accountability

States and accrediting bodies have made important progress in developing a consensus as to quality standards and best practices in distance learning. In an environment where ineffective regulation can lead to student and employer dissatisfaction, it is even more important that students, and employers, have information to make informed and appropriate educational choices. To ensure the integrity of distance learning, colleges and universities and states also must strive to maintain high academic standards and to address concerns about security and student identity. To help persons make informed and appropriate choices, states, and college and university leaders can:

- Provide better information about the transferability of courses among two- and four-year colleges and universities and technical institutions. Articulation agreements and policies at the state, institutional and regional levels should support easy transfer.
- Establish course ratings and evaluations to which prospective students have ready access. States should encourage — and colleges and universities should adopt — methods for informing prospective and current students about courses and programs.

- Develop common definitions for distance learning so that policy-makers can assess the scope and success of state efforts. States should ensure that data are collected and that they can be compared with data from other states. These data — on enrollments, degree completions and access to distance-learning infrastructure — should be part of every state's data-collection efforts. The SREB-State Data Exchange and the *Electronic Campus* are working on an effort to establish a data-collection framework.

- Use effective evaluation procedures to measure the results of both traditional and distance learning. In evaluating effectiveness, states and institutions should include measures such as the dropout rates for courses and the graduation rates for programs. These measures should be used in establishing strategies for continuous improvement and in making budget decisions.

- Use costing methodology models that national and regional groups are developing and that several SREB states are testing. States and institutions can use these models to understand better the cost of providing electronic instruction, to assess distance learning's "value added" compared with the value of traditional face-to-face instruction, and to make more informed decisions.

Cost Methodologies

WICHE's Technology Costing Methodology (TCM) project has developed and is testing cost-analysis tools, including standard definitions of cost categories, for institutions and multi-institutional agencies. The tools, which were tested in three SREB states (Florida, Georgia and Louisiana) through the work of SREB's Educational Technology Cooperative will help policy-makers analyze the costs of instructional approaches that use technology heavily and will make it possible to compare cost data for different instructional approaches.
See www.wcet.info/projects/tcm.

The challenge ahead

SREB's new Goals for Education and the recommendations set forth in this document are a call for action. This strategic study on distance learning points the way to an accessible, affordable and high-quality education for all who seek it. In many respects, the Distance Learning Policy Laboratory's work is just beginning. The challenge now — for states, colleges and universities, and SREB — is to promote policy change that supports the three broad objectives of extending access, improving quality and lowering costs.

Reports and Recommendations in a Series on Distance Learning Policy Issues

"Creating Financial Aid Programs That Work for Distance Learners" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Financial Aid Subcommittee"*

"Using Finance Policy to Reduce Barriers to Distance Learning" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Finance Subcommittee"*

"Distance Learning and the Transfer of Academic Credit" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Credit Issues Subcommittee"*

"Anytime, Anyplace Services for the 21st Century Student" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Student Services Subcommittee"*

"The Challenges of Quality Assurance in a Distance Learning Environment" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Quality Assurance Subcommittee"*

"Empowering Faculty to Utilize Technology: A Guide to Principles, Policies and Implementation Strategies" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Faculty Issues Subcommittee"*

"Universal Access to Technology and Support: An Achievable Goal for the South" *A Report of the SREB Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Underserved Learners Subcommittee"*

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Goals for education

1. All children are ready for the first grade.
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for postsecondary education and a career.
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
12. The state places a high priority on an education *system* of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.

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